St Michael's Foundation is a registered charity number 1092919 which publishes original works of Christian theology and welcomes donations, please.

Other titles available:

A Grain of Mustard Seed

Everyday Thoughts

Minute Sermons

The Secular Terrorist

St Michael's Foundation for Spiritual Understanding

The Four Gospels and St Paul

A short study course

I: St Matthew

II: St Mark

III: St Luke

IV: St John

V: St Paul

The Gospel of St Matthew

The pace and style of St Mark's Gospel is so breathtaking you could think it was composed while the writer was on horseback. By contrast, the Gospel of St Matthew is a finely-wrought thing, painstakingly constructed, like someone patiently weaving a complex tapestry to tell an historical tale. An old tradition says that this gospel was written by the apostle St Matthew, the former tax-gatherer, and that it was written in Hebrew and only later translated into the Greek of the New Testament. This is very unlikely for it contains the whole of St Mark's gospel which was written twenty years earlier and written in Greek. Incidentally, the Greek of the New Testament is not that spoken by Plato and Aristotle, but a later, local Greek called *Koine*. It's a bit like a local dialect. You can pick up a Greek New Testament very cheaply from *The British and Foreign Bible Society* and learn to read it quite easily alongside your English version.

So, we recall, St Mark's Gospel was written about AD 65 and St Matthew around AD 85. We know that the Roman legions sacked Jerusalem in AD 70 and destroyed the temple. So there was a great tide of refugees, among them many of the early Christians. They went to Syria, and one of the earliest Christian churches was set up in Antioch. It was in Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first known as *Christians*. Antioch was most probably where St Matthew's gospel was written.

It does not start as a page-turner, but with a whole list of genealogy, tracing Jesus' ancestry back through King David to Abraham. Lots of *And so-and-so begat so-and- so.* Don't give up there, though: it soon starts to get interesting. The Angel of the Lord appears and we have the Annunciation. But this is not St Luke's gospel, so the angel's name is not given as Gabriel.

And he does not make his announcement to Mary, but to Joseph. Then St Matthew gives us his version of the Christmas story. There are wise men following the star – but no shepherds abiding in the fields. King Herod features prominently and orders the massacre of the innocents. And so here, right at the start of the gospel, we see St Matthew revealing his own preoccupations.

Chief among these preoccupations is to demonstrate that Jesus is the new Moses. That's why we have the murder of all the two-year-old children by Herod: this is a reflection of the similar slaughter which Pharaoh inflicted upon the children of Israel. Moses escaped in the bulrushes. Jesus escapes into Egypt. When the coast is clear, he comes back from Egypt allowing St Matthew to say *Out of Egypt have I called my Son.* Just as he called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt at the Exodus. In this fabulously intricate tapestry of narrative, Matthew is saying that Jesus is the new Moses and his death and resurrection are the new Exodus – for they bring deliverance to God's new people the Christians.

St Matthew is very keen on using quotations from the Old Testament to show that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Chosen One of God. But he doesn't just use *texts* to do this: rather *actual people and events* in the Old Testament are pre-figurations of Jesus and all his works. I mentioned the link between Moses and Jesus. St Matthew establishes a similar link between King David and Jesus. King David, you remember, was a shepherd boy who became King. Jesus is the one who announces the Kingdom and he is also the Good Shepherd.

These sorts of connections seem abstruse and obscure to the modern mind which thinks in terms of causation. But the rich tapestry of St Matthew's gospel goes deeper than mere

causation and, by analogy, comparison and mysterious connection, lets us see something of the mind of God. God works by giving signs in one age of what he will do in another. Both Moses and David are in themselves predictions of Christ. The Suffering Servant in *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah – who is led like a sheep to the slaughter* – is also a prediction of Jesus Christ. In other words, God leaves evidence of his workings in the historical record and the significance of his activities is revealed by the gospel writer to the discerning reader: *He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.*

Let us look more closely at St Matthew's preoccupations – one might almost say *obsessions*. Because he has such respect for the Old Testament, for the Law and for the priests and rabbis who were in charge of the Law, Matthew is incandescent in his condemnation when the priests and rabbis go wrong. It is the priests who pay Judas his thirty pieces of silver to betray Jesus. But for Matthew, the priests are even worse than Judas. At least Judas repents, saying:

I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood.

But the priests answer this desperately contrite man: *What is that to us?*

You could not have a greater condemnation of the chief priests than that: for they were the guardians of the Law – the very ones who were appointed to defend the innocent – and all they can say about the condemnation of an innocent man is *What is that to us?* They do take the thirty pieces of money back from Judas though, and they buy a field with it: *Akeldama – the field of blood.* And they make a cemetery of it for foreigners – whose relatives they can then charge for the privilege of being buried there.

of Jesus. Biography is a modern literary genre – like the novel. The gospels are not biographies but preaching and teaching material based on incidents in the life of Christ as recalled by eye-witnesses, preserved in oral tradition and finally edited under the names of the four writers Mark, Matthew, Luke and John.

It is widely agreed that St Mark's gospel was the first to be written. Why do we think this? Because the whole of the gospel of Mark is reproduced in the gospel of Matthew and half of it in Luke. We know only a little about St Mark: that he was a companion of St Paul on one of the missionary journeys, and St Peter's first Epistle tells us that he had Mark with him in Rome shortly before Peter's crucifixion in Nero's persecution in AD 65. St Mark seems to have spent a lot of time with St Peter and, in the very first chapter of his gospel, he records how Jesus healed St Peter's mother-in-law of her fever. In AD 140, Bishop Papias of Hieropolis wrote: *Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that Peter remembered of the things said and done by the Lord.*

Each of the four gospels has its own character and they are all so different: If St Luke's gospel is a love story, St Matthew's an intricate tapestry, St John's a metaphysical poem, then St Mark's is a telegram from the bridge of *The Titanic* one minute after the iceberg struck. That is, it is a gospel of crisis, of desperation with the sense of a spectacular ending.

Mark is something of a wild man and his language is the coarsest Greek in the New Testament. He is impetuous and relentless. His gospel is peppered with the word *euthus* which is translated *straightway* or *immediately.* St Mark's gospel is a picture of restless, busy men, always on the go. His language is often violent as when he reports how Jesus cursed the barren fig

tree and threw the money-changers out of the temple. He shows Jesus treating even his family and friends roughly. When the disciples tell him, *behold thy mother and thy brethren seek thee.* He answers, *Who is my mother, or my brethren?* And when Peter will not accept Christ's prophecy that he will go up to Jerusalem and be crucified, Jesus addresses Peter as the devil: *Get thee behind me Satan!* Mark, the wild man, portrays Jesus as a wild man and says *He is beside himself!*

There is no Christmas story in St Mark's gospel. No shepherds. No Kings. No inn. No manger. He begins his gospel with Jesus already a grown man. There are no resurrection stories either. No appearance of Jesus in the upper room, by the sea or on the walk to Emmaus. The last eight verses of the gospel – which do include a resurrection appearance - are a 2nd century addition by an editor who couldn't put up with the starkness and bleakness of St Mark's original ending. St Mark tells us of the crucifixion. But there are no comforting words from the Cross. In St Mark's gospel Jesus does not say to the thief *Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.* He does not gently give his mother into the care of St John. He does not say, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.* The only words from the mouth of the dying Jesus are words of dereliction: *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* And then the scene at the tomb on Easter morning. The women do not see the risen Jesus. The scene is desolate, terrifying, panic-stricken:

And they went out quickly and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed; neither said they anything to any man; for they were afraid.

The theologian Denis Nineham gives us a good insight into the character of Jesus as portrayed by St Mark:

Anyone who reads this gospel straight through will recognise

that it is as the Son of God rather than as a teacher or a prophet that St Mark presents Our Lord. Jesus comes before us as the mysterious Son of God – a numinous, rather awful figure whose work is to bring home to his generation the conviction that, by his ministry and his death, he will hasten the coming of the kingdom.

There are only thirty-four verses of parables in St Mark's gospel – mainly the Parable of the Sower. And even this is included only to mock his disciples for their lack of understanding: *Know ye not this parable? And how then will ye know all parables?*

The relentless *allegro agitato* of St Mark's gospel is a vivid, breathtaking account of conflict: Jesus the exorcist and his conflict with the demons, with sickness, with stupidity, with obduracy, hardness of heart and with the corrupt religious authorities.

In the midst of all this haste and strife, there are some astonishingly personal and evocative touches. I said that St Mark was close to St Peter. Well, in his account of how all the disciples *forsook him and fled*, St Mark includes these mysterious words:

And there followed Jesus a certain young man, having a linen cloth cast about his naked body; and the young men laid hold on him. And he left the linen cloth and fled from them, naked.

Why mention such a detail? The intriguing conjecture is that this is St Mark's signature: that *he* was the young man in the linen cloth who fled naked on the night when Jesus was arrested.

Not many parables in this gospel, but plenty of prophecy. Jesus explicitly foretells the fall of Jerusalem – something which

came to pass about twenty-seven years after the crucifixion. Looking out over the city, Jesus says:

Seest thou these great buildings? There shall not be left one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down. When ye shall see the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet standing where it ought not, then let them that be in Judea flee unto the mountains...

The abomination of desolation was the Roman standard. The Roman legions sacked Jerusalem in AD 70.

Plenty of prophecy. Prophecy in which Jesus out of his mouth reveals exactly who he is:

Again the High Priest asked him and said unto him, 'Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' And Jesus said, 'I am: and ye shall see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven...'

And then shall they see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And then shall he send his angels and shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven.

So in all the restlessness, disjunction and violent movement of St Mark's gospel, who is Jesus meant to be? You know that *gospel* means *good news*. But what is the good news according to St Mark among all this fear and disturbance? The answer is that the good news is so amazing that even the disciples who live close to Jesus every day don't understand it. The good news is so wild, incredible, original and unexpected that they don't get it even when Jesus spells it out to them in words of one syllable:

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected of the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

You couldn't make it plainer than that, could you? St Mark is telling us that Jesus is the Suffering Servant of God prophesied in *the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:*

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and we hid, as it were, our faces from him; he was despised and we esteemed him not...he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

For St Mark it is not the teaching of Christ which is at the centre of what he means. It is what he does in his life of absolute conflict. Even more, it is what Christ achieves by his death and demonstrates by his resurrection. I said at the start that the gospels are not biographies or novels. But, on reflection, we see that St Mark's gospel has much in common with the modernist novel – in which the unknown, mysterious and misunderstood stranger, whom no one understands, turns out to be the ambiguous tragic and triumphant hero who brings about deliverance.

The Gospel of St Luke

There is nothing in St Mark or St Matthew's gospels that could be called *literary style*. But we discover exquisite writing in St Luke's:

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared before the face of all people to be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us, for it is toward evening and the day is far spent...

This man went unto Pilate and begged the body of Jesus. And he took it down and wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a sepulchre that was hewn in stone wherein never man before was laid.

So what do we know about the author of the gospel which has St Luke's name on it? There is an early 2nd century manuscript called The Anti-Marcionite Prologue which says:

Luke was a Syrian of Antioch, a doctor by profession, who was a disciple of the apostles and later followed St Paul until his martyrdom. He served the Lord without distraction, unmarried, childless, and fell asleep at the age of eighty-four in Boeotia, full of the Holy Spirit.

When we say he was a doctor, we mustn't think of a gentlemanly GP with his surgery in a nice part of town. Under Roman rule, doctors were slaves, sent for training by rich families to learn to look after them and their close relations and friends.

We know that St Luke went with St Paul on one of his missionary journeys. He wrote about this memorably and set it down in his other book which we know as *The Acts of the Apostles* – in which he describes a storm at sea and how they were shipwrecked. This lesson is read at St Michael's, Cornhill at the Annual Service of the Honourable Company of Master Mariners and it is utterly brilliant: you sit there, feeling the wind

and the waves, feeling definitely queasy:

Then, fearing lest we should have fallen among rocks, they cast four anchors out of the stern and wished for the day...and when they had taken up the anchors, they committed themselves unto the sea and loosed the rudder bands, and hoisted up the mainsail to the wind and made toward shore...

St Luke was the companion, friend and doctor to St Paul. He attends St Paul in prison in Rome under Nero's persecution. St Paul expresses his affection for him in his *Epistle to the Colossians:*

Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you...

And in his *Second Letter to Timothy* St Paul, again from jail, says:

Only Luke is with me.

St Matthew and St Mark's gospels are material for reading aloud in church services in private houses under persecution. St Luke's gospel is much more like our modern notion of a book. It has the author's name on it and it is addressed to a reader. The language is magnificent and this is how it begins:

It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightiest know the certainty of those things wherein thou hast been instructed.

Theophilus was perhaps some high-ranking official. He also represents that most modern thing, the general reader. *Theophilus* means *one who is loved by God.* . This means everyone. St Luke's Gospel is not written for the sect of Christians: it is addressed to the world.

What then are the contents and characteristics of St Luke's Gospel? It is St Luke alone among the gospel-writers who mentions the census:

And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed...

St Luke does not have the wise men, but the shepherds instead. The Annunciation is not, as in St Matthew, to Joseph, but to Mary who answers it sublimely:

Behold, the handmaid of the Lord. My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

St Luke alone has the story of the twelve year old Jesus in the Temple with the Chief Priests and Doctors of the Law: *Both hearing them and asking them questions.*

St Luke gives us two original stories: The Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. It is Luke alone who gives us the penitent thief on the cross and Christ's infinitely tender love for him:

Lord, remember me, when thou comest into thy kingdom! And Jesus said unto him, verily, I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

St Luke is extremely compassionate towards human suffering. Where St Matthew says, *Blessed are the poor in spirit,* St Luke says simply, *Blessed are the poor.*

He can write high rhetoric, exquisite poetry and realistic dialogue. Everything is loaded with tenderness, love and compassion, a direct and profound sympathy with the human condition, an utterly undeceived understanding of human frailty and of the limitless mercy of God in Christ. All this comes together in verses such as:

And he turned to the woman and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet.

St Luke's Gospel is the great love story in which Christ is the lover and we poor sinners, perverse, inadequate and pathetic, are the beloved.

But St Luke has no illusions. Christ the lover is also Christ the judge. And he provokes violence and division:

I am come to send fire on the earth: and what will I if it be already kindled? Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay, but rather division: for from henceforth there shall be five in one house divided three against two, and two against three. The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father; the mother against the daughter, and the daughter against the mother; the mother-in-law against her daughter and the daughter-in-law against her mother...

There is an arrogant and barmy idea that scepticism about miracles and the resurrection is a modern thing. The modern mind regards itself as liberated from the primitive superstitions of earlier ages. The modern mind thinks that people were stupid just because they lived a long time ago. St Luke shows that scepticism and unbelief were just as rife in New Testament times as they are today. Remember that walk to Emmaus on the first Easter Day, all in the April evening. Here are the mocking, sceptical disciples:

Yea, and certain women also of our company made us astonished which were early at the sepulchre. And when they found not his body, they came also saying that they had seen a

vision of angels which said that he was alive... and their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not.

Now who was St Luke? There is a tradition that he a friend of Joseph and Mary, and there is a lot to be said for this. For it is Luke alone among the gospel-writers who tells the intimate story of the Annunciation in detail and from Mary's point of view. And of Elizabeth and Zacharias and the infant John the Baptist and of Simeon. Of the boy Jesus in the temple. There is a legend that Luke painted a picture of the Holy Family. St Luke's symbol is an ox. And in the Middle Ages the oxen were given the day of on St Luke's Day. The rhyme has it:

On St Luke's Day the oxen do play...

All four gospels are glorious in their own way, but St Luke's is the most human and humane, the most intimate: the language is ravishing. I can read it only in small doses. When you feel cast down, anxious, fearful, sceptical and uncertain of God's love, turn to St Luke's Gospel and read a few verses. And the love of God comes rushing in like the warm west wind. He achieves so much, but I will end with what I think is the pinnacle of his achievement.

St Luke features women prominently throughout his gospel. He makes women the witnesses to the resurrection. Now, in those times in the Middle East the witness of women counted for next to nothing. In fact, if someone cited the evidence of women, it was regarded as a reason for *not* believing whatever they asserted.

The resurrection took place let's say about AD 33. St Luke's Gospel appeared about AD 85. So that gave him fifty years – plenty of time to rub out the unbelievable evidence of the women at the tomb and make the witnesses to the resurrection

some stout and reliable chaps. But St Luke doesn't. He leaves the women as the first witnesses. This is counter-cultural, counter-intuitive. The only reason he left the women as the first witnesses was because he knew this was the truth:

And the women also...were afraid and bowed down their faces to the earth...two men stood by them in shining garments and said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, he is risen...

The Gospel of St John

In St Mark's Gospel, Jesus is presented as the strong, vigorous Son of God. For St Matthew he is the fulfilment of the Jewish Law and the Prophets. In St Luke he is the universal Saviour. And now in St John's Gospel, Jesus is the Incarnate Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity.

This Gospel was written towards the end of the 1st Century: we know this from papyri dating from early in the 2nd century which refer to it. The character of St John's Gospel is remarkable, very different from the other three. There are no parables, no commandment to the disciples to baptise. There is, strikingly, no account of the institution of Holy Communion. And yet St John's is the most theological and the most sacramental of all the Gospels. But also in St John we have a profound theological teacher who sprinkles his work with whimsical episodes and jokey, even satirical, comments. So when the disciple Philip introduces Jesus as from Nazareth, Nathanael shrugs and says:

Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?

Today someone might say, *What? Surely he never comes from Barnsley! Or Sarfend.*

The intensely theological is all mixed up with brazen jokiness. For instance, when Jesus is speaking with the woman at the well – about no less a topic than the water of eternal life – the woman tells Jesus that she's not married and he replies:

Thou hast well said, I have no husband: for thou hast had five husbands – and he whom thou now hast is NOT thy husband!

So what do we find in St John's Gospel which we find in none of the others? There is the wedding at Cana and the water into wine. Jesus' conversation in the middle of the night with Nicodemus about being born again. Here too there is a sardonic, satirical response to the literalistic academic Nicodemus who thinks being born again must mean entering a second time your mother's womb. And Jesus replies,

Art thou a master of Israel and knowest not these things?

In St John's Gospel Jesus is not made out to be a prophet, or even a teacher. Rather he speaks boldly of himself. The words are specifically, repeatedly, I AM. So:

I am the good Shepherd... I am the vine.

And, supremely, at his trial before the High Priest, Jesus uses those words I AM to reveal that he is God:

Before Abraham was, I AM

This is the centre of St John's proclamation. There is no room in his Gospel for the typical liveryman's or freemason's, or any other modern liberal, semi-believing, respectable sub-Christian view of Jesus as *one of the great teachers.* You know the kind of thing. I hear it all the time from these respectable people:

I don't go along with all that miraculous, Son of God, stuff. But

I think Jesus did a lot of good

You can't have that, says St John. He tells us straight: a man who goes around saying that he is God on earth is either exactly who he says he is – or else he is bonkers. And Jesus does go around saying this, again and again:

I and my Father are one...All things that the Father hath are mine...And now O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was...

And Jesus does not merely *say* these things, but he backs them up with actions as in the raising of Lazarus. St John alone contains this very long, detailed and dramatic story.

Unlike the other gospel-writers, St John does not give us Jesus breaking bread and offering the cup. He does not say *Do this in remembrance of me*. And yet St John's Gospel is the most sacramental of all four gospels, for he tells us what the eating of the bread of the Eucharist and the drinking of the Cup actually signify. Jesus speaking in St John's Gospel is explicit:

Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.

Jesus is also explicit on church authority: *Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained*

These are hardly the words of a decent chap who had a few good ideas, don't you know! It's a long way from the do-gooding type who goes in for a bit of social involvement – so beloved of the modern, half-believing bishops and clergy. St John is in effect saying, *Either take Jesus at his own estimation of himself – or leave him alone.*

And so we come to St John's presentation of Good Friday. St John in two words declares that the death of Christ brings about life for us. From the Cross, Jesus declares:

It is finished!

The original meaning of the word is *accomplished. It is accomplished.*

For St John, the death of Christ is not a tragedy: it is a triumph.

Jesus is the dying and rising God. But he is not the dying and rising god of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Jesus is not part of any myth. He is the God who truly dies and truly rises again: not in fable but in history.

St John's Gospel is not just a theological treatise. He is the most personal and emotional of all four Gospel writers – even more than St Luke. Hear him as he writes of Jesus dying on the Cross:

When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son.

Or see him by the empty sepulchre on Easter morning:

Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?

Perhaps the most moving episode of all comes when, after his resurrection, Jesus restores Simon Peter. Remember, Peter denied Jesus three times. Here Jesus gives him three chances to confirm his love and then he commissions him as an apostle:

Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? And Peter said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.

Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

In each of these sermons on the Gospels, I have tried to send you away with one feature that characterises each Gospel. So what, if we may make so bold, is St John's singular theme and his greatest achievement? It is to condemn fiercely and repeatedly a form of wickedness in religion which throughout history is always erupting, threatening to undermine and finally destroy us. This is the phoney religion – what the Church Fathers call *heresy* – the phoney religion of *spirituality*

In the Roman Empire in New Testament times, this heresy was found in various strands of what is called *Gnosticism*. The Gnostics – the word derived from *gnosis, knowledge* – claimed to be the privileged sect who were in the know. And what they claimed to know was that the world is evil and it was not created by God. All material things, they taught, are evil. And the only thing to be valued and striven for is the world of pure spirit. This is not a merely theoretical matter for, if you believe that this world in which we live, move and have our being is insignificant and unreal, then you can easily go on to say that how you behave in this world doesn't matter. And that is the high-minded philosophical excuse for immorality, excess, cruelty, torture and indifference of every kind.

Gnosticism, spirituality, is the perennial phoney religion. It reappears in various disguises. It was there in the Manichees of St Augustine's day. It came again with the Albigensians. In our day, I can think of two places where this most vile and destructive influence appears. It is there on the *body, mind and spirit shelf* in all the new-agey hokum which, thanks to the gullibility of the public, makes such fortunes for the trashy booksellers and popularises the colour supplements. And Gnosticism is there in every interpretation of life which is

theoretical: the phoney world of abstractions, systems, processes and techniques. This is our modern world, wonderfully satirised by T.S. Eliot when he spoke of:

Men dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.

St John's Gospel is the remedy for this pernicious stuff. No theory will do for St John. We cannot escape this world into the higher world of abstract ideals – that Gandhi-esqe, Tolstoyan, Hampstead-Buddhist, Madame Blavatsky, diets and Inner Light fantasy of pure spirituality which urges you to *get in touch with your true self.* That way, says St John, is not just the lofty tastefulness of refined people: it is poisonous. For St John, truth is about eating Christ's Body and drinking his Blood. Supremely, he repeats this until he is blue in the face in the superb Christmas gospel in which he tells us that God made himself into the lowest of the low in order to raise us to the highest heaven. The everyday world is not insignificant, it is not an illusion and it is not evil. No one could put it more clearly, more vehemently than St John:

All things were made by him and – just in case we are too stupid to get this - *without him was not anything made that was made...And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld his glory: the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*

The Gospel according to St Paul

I went round to my butcher in Smithfield on the morning of 25th January for some belly pork and saw the City workers buying in their lumps of haggis to celebrate something called *Burns Night.* Later I was walking down Cheapside behind two young City types. One of them broke off his solipsistic jabber on his

portable phone to say to the real person beside him: *I've never been to a Burns Night party before. I hope we don't have to listen to any poetry.* But the end of January gives us a far superior reason for rejoicing. It is the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul.

Paul is one of God's supreme miracles and acts of grace. He is second only to Jesus Christ himself in the history of Christianity. Consider this: it was St Paul and not the gospel writers who first gave us those words from the Last Supper, *In the same night that he was betrayed he took bread...Likewise after supper he took the cup...* Paul was the greatest of all the Christian teachers. He was the biggest influence on the Catholic St Augustine and on the Protestant Martin Luther. Paul's teaching that life is a crisis demanding decision is even at the centre of the philosophy of atheistic existentialists

It was Paul who defined in words of one syllable the human predicament: *The thing I do, that I would not; and the thing I would not, that I do.* Many philosophers had said the problem with us human beings is our passions which run away with us. We will a particular thing, but our desires throw us of course. But Paul realised that the fault does not originate in the passions but in the will itself. We consist of contradictory volitions. We really are divided selves.

As a Greek-speaking Pharisee, he had read deeply not only into the Old Testament but into the classics of Greek literature. He was the genius who tried to fuse all these influences together. He couldn't do it. It was only after his prolonged meditation on the Person of Christ that he made sense of our divided selves. So here he quotes Euripides from the 5th century BC: *We know the good; we apprehend it clearly: But we cannot bring it to fruition.* It is a truth repeated by Paul's near contemporary, Ovid

who said *I see and approve better things, but follow worse.* Isn't that what you do, if you're honest? And isn't it what I do? And the result is, or ought to be, a sense of self-disgust. What Paul calls a sense of sin. This is the beginning of Christianity. In the Old Testament, God said, *Be good!* And we find we can't be good. Paul expressed this conclusively: *All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.* This is a punning piece of poetry – a metaphor taken from the Greek archery contests. The Greek word for *sins* is *hamartia*. And in the archery contests that's what they called the arrows which fell short of the target, *hamartia*. So to sin is to fall short.

We cannot save ourselves. We cannot rescue a coherent self from our divided self. So God has to find another remedy and this remedy is spelt out and named by St Paul: it is Christ crucified. He drives home this wonderful news of our salvation in the most beautiful and exalted prose:

Abraham had faith and God imputed it to him as righteousness. For us also it shall be imputed if we believe on him that raised up Jesus Our Lord from the dead. Who was delivered for our offences and was raised again for our justification. Therefore, being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The divided self produces in us anxiety, *Angst*. We are not at ease with ourselves. We find we become dissatisfied. Like Hamlet, we can even find the whole of life and experience *a foul and pestilential congregation of vapours.* In loneliness. In our need for love and, when we don't find it, our thrashing around in so many false substitutes for love. Compounded by the frustration that this leads to. What C.S. Lewis described as *an ever increasing craving for an ever decreasing pleasure.* Or in the dark hours the restless mind runs on. In bad dreams even.

We can even be anxious in our sleep. This is when we can turn to St Paul's glorious *Epistle to the Romans* and find rest:

Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ who died, yea rather that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? Nay in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither life nor death, not angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus Our Lord.

St Paul had a fully incarnated physical presence: he asks for his books and his cloak; and he tells us to stop drinking water and take some wine. He has a besetting sin – his *thorn in the flesh* – and he is outrageous enough to believe that God has afflicted him with this besetting sin in order to stop him getting too big for his boots. He got too big for his boots anyway; but he knew the cure – he coined the phrase himself – *charity shall cover the multitude of sins.*

St Paul was no stained glass saint but a real flesh and blood man, passionate, emotionally charged, requiring love. In jail in Rome he writes imploringly to Timothy:

Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me. For Demas hath forsaken me and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia; Titus unto Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me...

Paul so often gives us the sense of his close physical presence. How movingly he writes to the Galatians: *Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand...*

Even in prison in Rome, in danger of execution, he finds vivid opportunities to teach the gospel:

Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness. And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

This is Paul in his prison cell. There's no doubt he was looking through the grille at the Roman soldier standing guard: at his breastplate, his shoes, shield, helmet and sword. He doesn't preach abstractions but, by using the physical realty which he sees around him, – even using the threatening reality of military detention - to teach us the truth that makes us free.

For all his great learning, St Paul is not the ponderous didactic professor. He is the supreme poet of mystical insight. There is this:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am becoming as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal...Now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know, even as I am known.

And then there is a gaiety which Henry Purcell put marvellously into music:

Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice...Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.

We can even be anxious in our sleep. This is when we can turn to St Paul's glorious *Epistle to the Romans* and find rest:

Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ who died, yea rather that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? Nay in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither life nor death, not angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus Our Lord.

St Paul had a fully incarnated physical presence: he asks for his books and his cloak; and he tells us to stop drinking water and take some wine. He has a besetting sin – his *thorn in the flesh* – and he is outrageous enough to believe that God has afflicted him with this besetting sin in order to stop him getting too big for his boots. He got too big for his boots anyway; but he knew the cure – he coined the phrase himself – *charity shall cover the multitude of sins.*

St Paul was no stained glass saint but a real flesh and blood man, passionate, emotionally charged, requiring love. In jail in Rome he writes imploringly to Timothy:

Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me. For Demas hath forsaken me and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia; Titus unto Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me...

Paul so often gives us the sense of his close physical presence. How movingly he writes to the Galatians: *Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand...*

Even in prison in Rome, in danger of execution, he finds vivid opportunities to teach the gospel:

Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness. And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

This is Paul in his prison cell. There's no doubt he was looking through the grille at the Roman soldier standing guard: at his breastplate, his shoes, shield, helmet and sword. He doesn't preach abstractions but, by using the physical realty which he sees around him, – even using the threatening reality of military detention - to teach us the truth that makes us free.

For all his great learning, St Paul is not the ponderous didactic professor. He is the supreme poet of mystical insight. There is this:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am becoming as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal...Now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know, even as I am known.

And then there is a gaiety which Henry Purcell put marvellously into music:

Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice...Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.

Is it comfort and reassurance you need?

For now is Christ risen and become the first fruits of them that slept..for since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead...For as in Adam all men die, so in Christ shall all be made alive.For this corruptible must out on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?

Finally, this is how deep St Paul's love for Jesus Christ went. His body even took on the imprint of the nails, and he says:

From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.

Reviews of "A Partial Vision: English Christianity & The Great Betrayal" - a new book by Peter Mullen

The Northern Echo *by Pru Farrier*

'There are varieties of futility and then there are the Church of England authorities". In this sulphurous sentence, Peter Mullen encapsulates his view of that institution's modernisers.

Scornful critic of the touchy-feely, lets-do-a-jig-for-Jesus style of service dating from the Sixties, here he supports his view of all that is wrong with the Church of England with a rigorous comparison of classic texts and their contemporary counterparts.

He maintains that, having sidelined the Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible, what the Anglican Church now offers, after years of tinkering, amounts to dubious theology, a watered-down understanding of what it is to be Christian and sometimes beliefs that are actually atheistic.

Equally serious for this pugnacious proponent of tradition is his argument that today's "infantilised" version of the faith is ill-equipped to deal with our "suicidal infatuation with secularisation" and with the spread of Islam.

Contrasts between, for example, Cranmer's rhythmic cadences and the euphemistic banality and limp wording of modem rites make it hard to refute his stance.

Mullen is an Anglican priest in the City of London, a weekly columnist in this newspaper and author of several fiction and non-fiction titles. Well-read and erudite, he has observed and experienced the direction taken by the Established Church over many decades.

The first two thirds of the book comprise an account of fundamental tenets of Christianity, starting with the question of whether God exists, moving to the mystery of the Trinity, and debating issues such as arguments concerning evil and ideas about atonement and salvation as they have developed from medieval times to modern existential angst. These are well-considered sections containing much that may be of value to churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike.

Part two, however, The Abandoned Heritage, finds the author ablaze with fire and brimstone aimed at the liberal bishops and politicised Synod for the way they have modified traditional stories and forms of worship to make them compatible with rational thinking.

Aptly, in this 400th anniversary year of the King James Bible, he suggests the reason why "England is one of the few secularised de-Christianised countries on earth is because the bishops and the clergy have all but banned the reading of the English Bible".

Offering insights into our materialistic society, he debunks fashionable notions about the importance of self-esteem, New Age spirituality and anything-goes morality.

He rebuts much of what the Archbishop of Canterbury has said in relation to the post-9/11 world. Women bishops and the feminisation of the Church are given short shrift. Happily, the "gay" question is not mentioned. For once, here is a subject of greater import: 50 years of "liturgical iconoclasm".

Reasons are manifold to account for the steady tramp of feet from the House of the Lord over that period, but the switch from sublime texts that betokened the transcendent in favour of quotidian simplicity has clearly not halted the trend.

To everything there is a season. Based on this analysis, the time seems ripe for a review.

A Partial Vision, English Christianity and the Great Betrayal by Peter Mullen, is available for £10 plus £2 p&p from the author at The Watch House, 10 Giltspur Street, London, ECLA 9DE.

Pru Farrier

From New Directions by Crispin Harrison

"The Holy Ghost is also the whirlwind of criticism and judgement which blows away all the trash and the perpetrators of the trash with it. The Holy Ghost is the refining fire of judgement." This conclusion to Peter Mullen's chapter on Whitsunday aptly expresses the tone of his book.

In the longer, first part of this book the author brilliantly presents orthodox faith and practice because he believes that the Church of England has embraced the secular agenda.

Frequently topical and wittily amusing, he confronts the ignorant and the unbeliever. The militant atheist Richard Dawkins gets a drubbing in the opening chapter on belief in God. A long section on the Person and work of Christ follows. Later he has a wise and thoroughly practical section on Prayer, then Baptism and Holy Communion and much more.. A great deal of the teaching a parish priest ought to give in the course of his ministry is covered in short, learned but easily understood chapters. The long section devoted to the Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ would make an excellent foundation for addresses in Holy Week and at Easter. His writing involves many helpful quotations from a wide range of disciplines, though regrettably there is no bibliography or index.

The shorter Part Two entitled "The Abandoned Heritage" is a trenchant but persuasive condemnation of the decline of the Church of England in the last fifty years. The author maintains that the heritage of English Christianity's doctrine and worship has been abandoned for what is infantile and worthless. The Church has embraced the secular agenda. His devastating ridicule of modern translations of the Bible is hilarious: The Alternative Service Book and Common Worship get similar treatment.

The Alternative Service Book was replaced in AD 2000 by the new book Common Worship. Peter Mullen observes,

"There were so many rites and prayers in the ASB that C.H. Sisson was led to refer to it as 'the book of variants.' But in Common Worship the concept of variety has been raised almost to infinity. In fact it is hard to determine whether there is a single item which we can refer to as CW: there is such a plethora of permitted alternatives and downloads that the very existence of the book might be a topic for speculative metaphysics. A better title for Common Worship would have been Prayers for the New Babel."

Mullen criticizes the General Synod for its failure to provide for the minority who cannot accept the ministry of women bishops, but he intends to stay and fight his corner. Many will disagree with much in the second part of this book and even find it deeply offensive, But Mullen's criticisms should be heeded.

"A Partial Vision: English Christianity & The Great Betrayal" is available from The Watch House 10 Giltspur Street London EC1A 9DE (£10 + £2.50 P&P)